

## Enhancing Interdisciplinary and Comparative Approaches to News Media:

The International Journal of Press and Politics Conference 2018

by Dr. Kirsi Cheas

In October 2018, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism hosted the fourth International Journal of Press and Politics (IJPP) conference at the University of Oxford, U.K. The author of this article participated in the IJPP 2018 conference with support received from the Media Industry Foundation of Finland. I was the only Finnish participant at the conference and presented a paper which compared American and Finnish foreign news, shedding light to different ways of organizing perspectives and what American and Finnish journalists could learn from each other, to create news that abounds in both depth and quantity of different perspectives. My paper was also concerned with different business models shaping media content in the U.S. and Finland.

The IJPP conference is an esteemed event and meeting place for researchers doing comparative and internationally oriented research. Benefits of comparative research have been listed by a number of leading media scholars focusing on political communication. For instance, Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004, 3) have highlighted the fact that “comparative analysis can protect us from false generalizations (...) but it can also encourage us to move from overly particular explanations to more general ones where this is appropriate.” Frank Esser (2013, 113) has noted that “comparative analysis (...) helps to prevent parochialism and ethnocentrism, but also to better understand one’s own system by juxtaposing its familiar structures against those of other

systems.” In his comparison of immigration news in France and the United States, Rodney Benson (2013, 2) discovered that,

the French approach has the virtue of making more room for multiple, often critical perspectives, diverse civil society voices, and in-depth expert analysis. The French approach may or may not be replicable in the United States, but it reminds us that there are alternatives. In an ideal world, citizens in all democracies would benefit from some combination of these – and other – national models.

The IJPP Conference also embraces interdisciplinarity, welcoming academics with backgrounds in different fields to come together and share their thoughts about systems and societies shaping political communication around the world. As comparative approaches, interdisciplinary studies are a way of shedding light to complex issues and understanding them in a more multifaceted manner. As scholars conducting comparative analysis, scholars engaging in interdisciplinary studies are expected to have an open mind, constantly expanding their field of expertise. In this way, interdisciplinary approaches also pave the way for innovative solutions, as scholars engage in new fields and create combinations of approaches which result in novel ways of looking at an issue. The Media Industry Foundation of Finland mentions the promotion of innovation as among its principal goals – with my travel grant, the goal was to explore how the IJPP Conference promotes innovation.

I was particularly eager about the IJPP Conference’s commitment to innovation and interdisciplinarity, given that I have experienced that such pursuits are often not encouraged in the Finnish academic context, especially for junior scholars. My colleagues and I, currently wrapping up doctoral dissertations or beginning a post-doctoral research career, have often been advised by more senior faculty claiming that interdisciplinary and comparative approaches are overly ambitious, demanding, time-consuming, and risky – thus it has been suggested it would be more recommendable for us to stick to more “traditional” approaches. For me, the IJPP

conference was the perfect opportunity to exchange thoughts and learn from exceptionally open-minded and knowledgeable scholars from different countries. I was enthusiastic to discover that colleagues and distinguished researchers I met at the IJPP conference took my ambitious efforts seriously, and rather than telling me how I should settle for something easier, renowned researchers like Paolo Mancini and Christian Vaccari, among others, listened to my ideas carefully and offered insightful ideas as to how to take them further.

I also enjoyed getting to know other junior scholars at the Conference whose research was both interdisciplinary and comparative. Many of their presentations included a practical dimension, explaining possibilities and limitations that journalists are facing in different regions. For instance, doctoral candidate Tali Aharoni discussed suspicion and distrust in the world of journalists covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while Dr. Dan Paget explored election campaigns in sub-Saharan Africa. Both of their works demonstrated that they had excellent knowledge of the particular geographical areas and cultural context they were focusing on, enabled by their interdisciplinary focus which reached beyond the sphere of media and communication to the societal system at large. In my own presentation, I explained how my background in area and cultural studies helped me comprehend the cultural context in which American and Finnish media operate as well as the countries of the Global South which were objects of the foreign news coverage I was analyzing. Between our presentations, I enjoyed fruitful discussions with Aharoni, Paget, and other junior and experienced researchers about the benefits of interdisciplinary and comparative research.

The problem of big conferences is that one often becomes overwhelmed by the dozens of overlapping sessions and presentations, and there is tendency for the formation of sub-groups within the large group – thus, often scholars do not really get to know new people beyond their

own field of expertise. At the IJPP conference, less than half of the abstracts that had been submitted were accepted. This not only guaranteed a high level of expertise among the accepted participants, but also led to the Conference having a relatively small overall amount of participants, who took the opportunity to actively engage with one another, getting to know new people and diverse topics. There were only two parallel sessions at a time, allowing the participants to hear many different presentations rather than missing most, as tends to be the case in big conferences. In this way, the very organization of the conference promoted its interdisciplinary focus, given that the different participants would become exposed to a range of different topics..

The open atmosphere promoted productive and critical discussions among all participants and the formation of new ideas. For instance, following the presentation of my ideas about internal and external pluralism in Finnish and American news, Professor Imke Hemkel noted that she was both puzzled and fascinated by the way I was defining the term “pluralism” – given my background in area and cultural studies, my definition differed from her perception shaped by her background in political science. Rather than imposing her ideas over those of mine, or vice versa, we ended up having a good discussion about how the concept can and could be used and expanded, to encompass more meanings and a wider cultural context. I believe this conversation helped both of us extend our understanding of pluralism. Had there been more parallel sessions, Hemkel would probably not have attended my presentation given the vastly different approach of our research projects – but it was precisely this difference in our perceptions and backgrounds that resulted fruitful. Thus I find that the IJPP Conference was successful in the ways in that it exposed scholars with different backgrounds to each other’s work and promoted interaction and mutual learning between us.

Solemn speeches about interdisciplinarity abound in different media departments around the world, but practical experience and research shows that these goals are often not met, as scholars are often not willing to look beyond their comfort zones. In their article “Media and Communication,” forming part of the *Oxford Handbook on Interdisciplinarity*, Adam Briggie and Christian Christians (2017, 223) note that “it is possible to discern two streams of academic study of media and communication, one social scientific and other humanistic. (...) Broad interdisciplinarity between these streams remains rare.” Already in 2004, media scholar Barbie Zelizer observed the following:

The terrain of journalism’s study has looked at times like a territory at war with itself. The contemporary study of journalism has divided journalism scholarship not only from each other but also from other parts of the academy. Within it are deep pockets separating groups of people who share concerns for the past, present, and future of journalism but lack a shared conversational platform for their concerns... (Zelizer, 2004, p. 3)

At the IJPP conference, talk about interdisciplinarity was not just talk – it was reality. It was wonderful to not only get to know distinguished scholars like Paolo Mancini, but to also realize that their success has resulted precisely from the kind of open-mindedness and brave approaches that are often emphasized but not so often practically embraced in media studies. Everyone at the IJPP Conference nodded when being asked whether their research plans had been considered risky. Without risk, there can be no innovation – for when we try something radically new, we never know whether it will actually work or not. And if we want to learn how our media practices can be improved, it is better to conduct comparative research as well – even if it may seem difficult – rather than limiting ourselves to a single national context, as in this way we can learn

valuable lessons about what kinds of practices have promoted or inhibited democratic outcomes in different parts of the world.

Right before leaving for the IJPP Conference, I was leader of a working group which called for the establishment of FINTERDIS – The Finnish Interdisciplinary Society (<https://www.finterdis.fi>), to offer support to junior scholars in particular in their interdisciplinary efforts. The Society, founded officially on October 4, 2018, gained the interest of dozens of students, doctoral candidates, and postdoctoral scholars as well as more advanced researchers in different parts of Finland, including media scholars. FINTERDIS is supported by and collaborates with the U.S.-based international Association for Interdisciplinary Studies. At the IJPP conference, I was able to discuss the implementation of FINTERDIS with media scholars at different career levels participating in the conference, and was happy to discover that they all found the project intriguing and wanted to hear more about it.

The IJPP conference also encouraged me to plan a panel discussion concerning interdisciplinarity in media studies for the next International Communication Association (ICA) conference in Washington D.C. in May 2019, featuring distinguished experts in interdisciplinary studies such as Julie Thompson Klein, in effort to introduce her ideas to media scholars and vice versa. At the same time, the IJPP conference gave me the willpower to continue pushing for more interdisciplinarity and expanding the field of media studies in the Finnish context – now a joint effort with the members of FINTERDIS. I am profoundly grateful for the Media Industry Foundation of Finland for the support to attend the IJPP conference and all the connections and possibilities that this conference helped me to create.

(\*Short bio of the author, in case you want to add it: *The author of this article, Kirsi Cheas, defended her doctoral dissertation at the University of Helsinki in January 2018. Currently, she*

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